

Oberlin College
Department of Politics

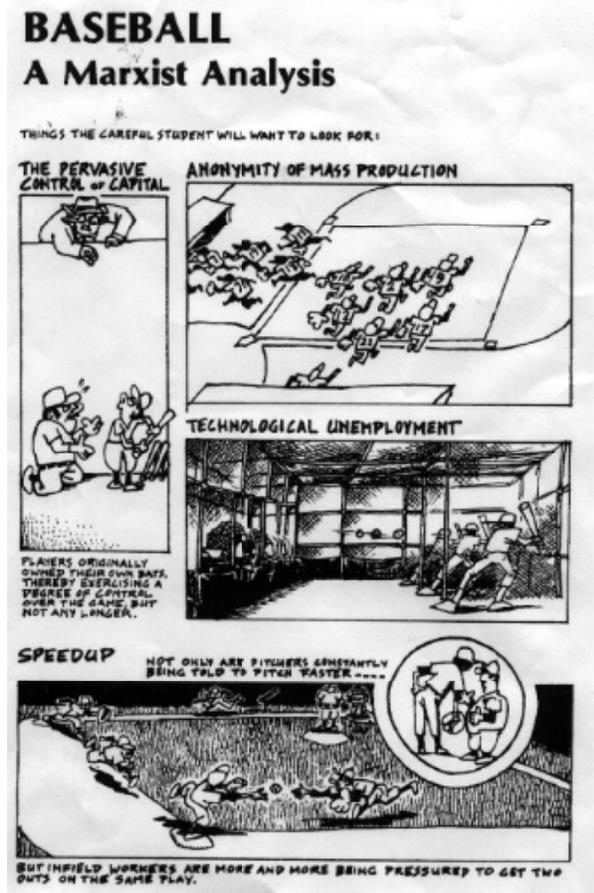
Politics 218: Marxian Analysis of Society and Politics

Fall 2011

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Karl Marx's own work and the extraordinary theoretical and analytical tradition he founded constitute the most thoroughgoing critical analysis of capitalism ever developed. With the deepening of capitalism's crisis, and now that Marx and the Marxian tradition can be recovered from the theoretical, analytical and practical distortions of "Marxism-Leninism" in the state socialist countries, social scientists have rediscovered Marxian theory as a tool to explain many of our contemporary vicissitudes. How much light can Marxian analysis shed?

Politics 218 relies significantly on discussion; except for our introductory week on Marxian theory itself, I will not be going over the material in detailed lectures. It is imperative, then, that before each class you complete the readings for the day. Otherwise, you will not be able to get much out of class.

We will use Blackboard in several ways.

- § To encourage reflective reading, help you retain what you have read, and help me guide and calibrate what we do in class, once each week I expect you to write on Blackboard a short response to questions about the works we are confronting that I will have posed in advance. You are also invited to comment there at any time on what others in the class have written. Start a debate! You may also use the blog to raise questions on which you would like help from me or from fellow students.
- § I use the blogs to promote your learning - they help you process and retain the material - not to evaluate it. I want you to think and write your blogs freely and creatively, and to take risks. Therefore I do not grade them. But because I view them as very important for your learning, I do factor heavily into my evaluation of your work simply whether you have done them seriously and regularly.
- § Once each week you should respond in writing on the blog to questions that I will pose for each session. Specifically, those of you with surnames beginning A-M will do so by Tuesday morning at 9:00 AM, and those with surnames N-Z by 9:00 AM Thursday. **THE 9:00 DEADLINE IS FIRM** because that's when I start preparing for class. Moreover, the blog closes at 9:00 AM, both to enforce this deadline and also because I do not want students making up missed blogs later in the semester; the whole point of the blogs is to do them week-in, week-out, not subsequently in order to meet a requirement. If you must miss or inadvertently have missed your appointed day, just post a reply for the other day that week; if you miss a week, do two the following week. You may, of course, respond twice each week if you like; the more often you do, the more you will learn.
- § Just before each class, prepare by taking a few moments to log in to the blog to read what everyone has written.

You will also write two open-book, take-home essays of approximately 1,500 words (\approx 6 pages) each. The schedule appears in the course outline below. These papers do require you to demonstrate command of the material, but they are oriented mainly toward developing your engagement with and analysis and interpretation of it. To give you an idea of what to expect and to help you orient your reading and thinking, starting on page 5 below you will find the essay questions used in the most recent offering of the course. You can expect many of the same issues to be treated this time around, probably with some of the same or similar questions.

I will evaluate your work according to the following weightings:

Regularity and seriousness (not "quality") of weekly blog comments	40%
Papers	20% each
Attentiveness and contribution in class	20%

Please take careful note of these proportions. They reflect my conviction that the process of participating in the course each week by reading, thinking and contributing to everyone else's learning in blogs and class discussion is as important as the two papers

you will write. In the past students who assumed that the papers were their main responsibilities for the course were unhappily surprised at the end of the semester. ☹

Americans spend five times as much on dog food as on college books. Politics 218 is doing its part to right our priorities. Please purchase the following volumes, which are available at the Oberlin Bookstore.

Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*

Michael Burawoy, *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process under Monopoly Capitalism*

Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA's 70-Year Quest for Cheap Labor*

Terry Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right*

John Bellamy Foster, *The Ecological Revolution: Making Peace with the Planet*

David Harvey, *The New Imperialism*

David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neo-Liberalism*

David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crisis of Capitalism*

Ira Katznelson, *City Trenches: Urban Politics and the Patterning of Class in the United States*

Christian Parenti, *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis*

William Strunk and E.B. White, *Elements of Style*

Howard Waitzkin, *The Second Sickness: Contradictions of Capitalist Health Care*

Erik Olin Wright, *Class Counts: Comparative Studies in Class Analysis (student edition)*

Erik Olin Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*

A few of our readings are on print reserve and E-res. The Eres password is Polt218 (and it is case-specific).

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Schedule of Classes, Topics, Readings and Assignments

N.b. Where we have more than one reading in a given week, please take them in the order listed.

September 6-13: Course Introduction, Marxian Theory

David McLellan, *Karl Marx*, chapter 2 (on reserve and Eres)

Terry Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right*

September 15-20: Political Economy I

David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neo-Liberalism*

September 22-27: Political Economy II

Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves*

September 29: Class canceled for *Rosh Hashanah* (out of respect for Marx, who descended from a long line of rabbis)

October 4-6: Class

Erik Olin Wright, *Class Counts* (read in the following order: chapters 1-5, 10-11, 6-9, 12)

October 11-13: Politics and the State I: Crime and Imprisonment

Christian Parenti, *Lockdown America*

FIRST ESSAY QUESTIONS DISTRIBUTED

October 18-20: Politics and the State II: Urban Politics

Ira Katznelson, *City Trenches*.

OCTOBER 21: FIRST PAPERS DUE.

November 1-3: Social Policy I: Health Care

Howard Waitzkin, *The Second Sickness*, chapters 1-6

November 8-10: Social Policy II: The Environment

John Bellamy Foster, *The Ecological Revolution*

November 15-17: Labor Process

Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, chapters 1-6 & 8

Michæl Burawoy, *Manufacturing Consent*, chapters 2, 5, 10-12

Michæl Burawoy, *The Politics of Production*, chapter 1 (on reserve and Eres)

November 22-29: Globalization

Harvey, *The New Imperialism*

SECOND ESSAY QUESTIONS DISTRIBUTED

December 1-6: Crisis

Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crisis of Capitalism*

December 8-13: The Transition to Socialism

Erik Olin Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, chapters 4, 6, 7 and conclusion

DECEMBER 20: SECOND ESSAY DUE

ESSAY QUESTIONS FROM THE MOST RECENT OFFERING OF THE COURSE

FIRST ESSAY TOPICS

1. What is driving change in contemporary political economy? To what extent can developments since the early 1970s be explained by reference to the impersonal economic tendencies and laws of motion of capitalism? In contrast, what role should be assigned to political action (on the part of workers and the state) and class struggle in the transition from Fordist to neo-liberal forms of accumulation? Be sure to refer to the arguments and examples contained in Harvey and Cowie (and perhaps Parenti), while also considering their relation to classical Marxian political economy.
2. What does Wright's elaboration of Marxian class structure gain? What does it lose? Think not just in terms of the structural analysis itself, but also about its ability to analyze gender, class consciousness, and/or class formation. Ground your analysis in Marxian theory itself.
3. Parenti offers a highly textured account of policing and imprisonment in the late 20th century. Analyze the Marxian "value-added" in his account. Has a Marxian approach enabled him to illuminate something that a non-Marxian would have missed? What specific use does he make of Marxian theory? What other possible Marxian arguments (if any) does he avoid, and is this a good decision? Has the Marxian approach blinded him to other equally valid explanations? What in his argument, if anything, is not particularly Marxian? Pay particular attention to issues of political economy, class, the state and ideology.
4. Katznelson offers a textured account of the type of politics that developed in northern Manhattan in the middle of the twentieth century. Has a Marxian approach enabled him to illuminate something that a non-Marxian would have missed? What specific use does he make of Marxian theory? What other possible Marxian arguments (if any) does he avoid, and is this a good decision? Has the Marxian approach blinded him to other equally valid explanations? What in his argument, if anything, is not particularly Marxian? Pay particular attention to issues of political economy, class, the state and ideology.
5. Marx had two theories of the state: an instrumental approach which treated the state as the tool of the bourgeoisie, and a structural approach in which the state and politics reflected the overall structure of capitalist society. In what ways do Marxian theories of the state figure in the accounts of Harvey, Cowie, Wright, and/or Parenti (choose two or more), and how persuasive are they? Pay attention to the state's motivations for its actions, and consider whether Marxian theory helps illuminate them. Where applicable, be sure also to analyze how changes in the structure of capitalism have affected the state's objectives, strategies and tactics over time. Can these changes and their political consequences be explained in Marxian terms?

6. Discuss the value and limits of Marx's dialectical approach, comparing it with a more standard analytical one. What does it reveal? What does it obscure or elide? Be sure to ground your argument solidly in appropriate readings.
7. What does Marxian theory mean by "surplus population"? What is distinctive about its explanation of why such a population comes into existence, compared with other theories that purport to explain it (such as demographic ones like Malthusianism or theories of demographic shifts like the "baby boom" or increased aging)? And how does a Marxian approach account for the fact that, in different periods, capitalism has thrown off different kinds of surplus populations, and dealt with them differently? Finally, how does it approach the implications of this problem?
8. Write out your own question, discuss it with me (a necessary step), and then respond to it.

SECOND ESSAY TOPICS

1. Waitzkin offers a highly textured account of health care. What specific use does he make of Marxian theory? Has it enabled him to illuminate something that a non-Marxian would have missed? What other possible Marxian arguments (if any) does he avoid, and is this a good decision? Has the Marxian approach blinded him to other equally valid explanations? Pay particular attention to issues of class, the state and political economy.
2. Foster offers a highly textured account of environmental problems in the late 20th century. What specific use does he make of Marxian theory? Has it enabled him to illuminate something that a non-Marxian would have missed? What other possible Marxian arguments (if any) does he avoid, and is this a good decision? Has the Marxian approach blinded him to other equally valid explanations? Pay particular attention to issues of class, the state and political economy.
3. Braverman, Burawoy and you are debating deskilling, machines, and politics. What is being said? (Yes, feel free to write this out as a "transcript," though you needn't do so.)
4. What, if anything, do the Marxian approaches to technology we have read help explain about our present world? What are their limitations or contradictions? Consider the arguments of at least two of these: a) Foster, b) Waitzkin, c) Braverman and Burawoy.
5. Is the US's turn to territorial imperialism in the early 21st-century, like the globalization that preceded it (and still continues), just the latest "spatial fix" for capitalism's crisis tendencies? What relationship, if any, does it have to do with flexible accumulation, neoliberalism, or neoconservatism? Consider Harvey's relationship to classical Marxian political economy.
6. Lenin once famously asked "What Is To Be Done?" Does Marxian theory provide a guide to approaching this question in our day and age? Refer specifically to the ideas put forward by at least several of our authors who address the issue (Harvey [*Neoliberalism*, chapter 7], Waitzkin, Foster, Wright [on "real utopias']). Feel free to develop your own analysis as well, grounding it in Marxian theory (in a way that argues either for its usefulness or uselessness).
7. Write out your own question, discuss it with me (a necessary step), and then respond to it in writing.